

Story and Meditation: Not Lacking

November 29, 2020

First Sunday of Advent

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

by *Eric Anderson*

Once there was an 'apapane who was bad at *everything*.

Some of the things he was bad at were, to be sure, things that 'apapane in general are bad at. He was, for example, a really poor swimmer. He could not chop down big koa trees. He could not drive a car.

As I say, these are things that 'apapane in general are bad at. I, for one, do not want to see an 'apapane trying to drive a car. I don't think that would go well. Or if it went at all I'm pretty sure the car would go in the wrong direction.

Lots of 'apapane are aware they don't do these things well, and they're perfectly fine about that. He, however, decided that this meant there was something wrong with him. And it made him brood about other things.

He decided that he was bad at singing. So he hardly ever sang. He decided that he was bad at flying, so he made his way through the trees just taking a few flaps at a time. He decided that he was bad at finding ohia in blossom. He decided that he was bad at finding spiders to eat. He decided that he was bad at building nests. He was sure he was bad at raising nestlings.

He was explaining this to his grandmother one day, who cocked her head and looked at him with surprise. "How do you know you're bad at raising children?" she asked. "You've never had any. You've never built a nest. You haven't married a wife."

All that was true. Still, he was sure he'd be bad at it. Wasn't he bad at flying?

"Are you?" she asked. "I only see you taking short glides with one or two flaps of the wings. You're out of practice."

What about all the ohia and spiders he couldn't find?

"If you flew more and farther, they'd be a lot easier to find," she told him.

"I'm definitely bad at singing," he muttered.

“Yes, you are,” said grandmother, whose patience had run out. “You’re not good at anything if you don’t try it, do it, repeat it, and get better at it. It’s a rare bird who is good at anything the first time. It’s a rare and sad bird who tries nothing, does nothing, and gets good at nothing.”

Fortunately, this ‘apapane turned out to be good at something: he was good at recognizing good advice. Eventually, he got to be good at flying, singing, and finding spiders. He was even good at raising young birds.

He never did learn to drive.

Michael J. Chan writes at Working Preacher, “...In preparing for Advent we miss something crucial if we overlook the fact that at the heart of Advent is a deep wound: God’s groaning, limping creation still waits for its healer to appear in glory and bring into reality what Christians know through faith. To use the language of this week’s epistle, we “wait for the revealing [literally, apokalupsin] of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:7). Advent is a time when we wait for the apocalypse. But 2020 feels apocalyptic enough that it just might work this year to explore the more wistful side of the season.”

By “wistful,” Dr. Chan means the anticipation of the Christmas celebration that has come to dominate the Advent season. I don’t mean the “war on Christmas.” The “war on Christmas,” this notion that acknowledging other holy days during this season packed with holy days is somehow anti-Christmas, is simply a lie.

Likewise, I do not mean the commercialization of Christmas. Actually, if I were to choose something that is an assault on the recognition of Jesus’ birth, this would be it. I have no objection at all to giving gifts to people, loved ones and strangers, in acknowledgement of Christ’s appearance in the world. I have a lot of objection to the barrage of messages encouraging me to buy this, that, or the other thing. But that’s not what I have in mind.

What I mean by the wistful anticipation of Christmas is the narrative of Mary and Joseph making their way to Bethlehem, following the directions of angels and dreams, with the light at the end of the tunnel being a tallow dip dimly illuminating a stable. For most of us, this is what Advent is about. Those who framed the season centuries ago had different ideas. So we get puzzled by the older Advent tradition reflected in today’s Scripture readings, speaking of “the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,” anticipating “the Son of Man coming in clouds.”

But Advent, as Dr. Chan said, is also waiting for a radical change in the world we know. He goes on to say, “The events of this year also draw attention to the profound contradiction between God’s promises and the brutal realities of life on this earth. Human beings are busy destroying one another and creation, but what makes matters worse is that God continues to permit it. To do a little bit of jazz with Mark 13, the tribulation is here but the Son of Man remains in the clouds (Mark 13:24-26).

“The painful irony is that the stronger our faith in the God of Israel, the more deeply we feel this contradiction. Advent invites us to linger on these matters, not only on the expectation of Christ’s second advent but also on the disappointing fact that it hasn’t happened yet.”

The painful irony, however, is also the source of Christian hope. As Karoline Lewis writes at *Working Preacher*, “At the heart of apocalyptic literature is encouragement and hope. To some extent, this is Jesus at his pastoral best. That which looks like devastation and defeat will be God’s victory. Out of the theological turmoil and confusion surrounding the destruction of the temple will be a new presence of God. Out of the suffering and death of their Messiah will be new life. God’s new way of being in the world will turn a cross into resurrection and a baby in a manger into salvation for the world.”

To his disciples, Jesus offered the contradictory observations that the radical changes in the world would be easy to see coming – “from the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near” – and impossible to predict – “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” His advice, however, held up whether the signs are easy to read or not. “Beware, keep alert.”

The Apostle Paul, writing some decades later, also did not know the day or the hour. Nor did the Corinthian Christians to whom he wrote. In a letter written in response to some serious questions they’d addressed to him, and informed by stories other people had told him, Paul made some pretty direct critiques of their faith, their worship, their organization, and even the individual morality of their members. He started, however, by reminding them of this: “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We are overwhelmed. This is not an unprecedented time – for heaven’s sake, there are precedents and more of widespread disease, of political turmoil, and of injustice protested. All three happened within the lifetime of one woman here in Hawai’i. As Ku’u Kaoanoe and April Estrellon reported for *Civil Beat*, in 1881, smallpox erupted on O’ahu just weeks after the departure of King Kalakaua on a diplomatic voyage. The regent, Princess Lili’uokalani, closed sea traffic between O’ahu and the neighbor islands. Later, she would be deposed by treasonous cabinet ministers who enlisted the aid of the American military. She spent the rest of her life protesting the injustices that followed.

So there are precedents. That doesn’t stop us from being overwhelmed. These are overwhelming times. It’s probably not possible to be awake and aware and attentive all the time. What’s assuring is that God is with us. God has given us gifts of the spirit. We are not lacking in any spiritual gift as we wait for... all the things we wait for.

Jesus’ advice is to put those spiritual gifts into practice. Paul’s advice through the rest of that letter to the Corinthians was basically, “put them into practice the right way, and for pity’s sake stop doing it the wrong way.” For the ‘apapane, it was to practice, practice, practice. The gifts

were there, his grandmother knew. But no talent finds expression without exercise. No skill gets polished without work. No gift emerges if you don't let it out.

Sing your hymns at home. Sing them loud. Pray your prayers, including that prayer of thanks that so far, we're doing... OK. Study those Scriptures filled with people living in times they probably thought were unprecedented and who found strength in God to endure. Read Paul's good advice to the Corinthians and think about how your spiritual gifts might be shared. Love your family. Help your friends. Be generous to the stranger.

You have what you need. God gave it to you. Practice it.

Amen.